

In HoH14, we reviewed *Suspiria*. In HoH18, *Deep Red*. Both by Italian director/writer/designer Dario Argento. Following earlier reviews of *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Crazies* and *Martin* (HoH3, 6, 14), we then interviewed their director, George A. Romero in HoH15.

Both top horror men have now teamed up to make *Dawn of the Dead*. so, in answer to your letters, and to put you totally in the picture, we now present the following.

BEFORE THE DAWN

An Interview with Dario Argento

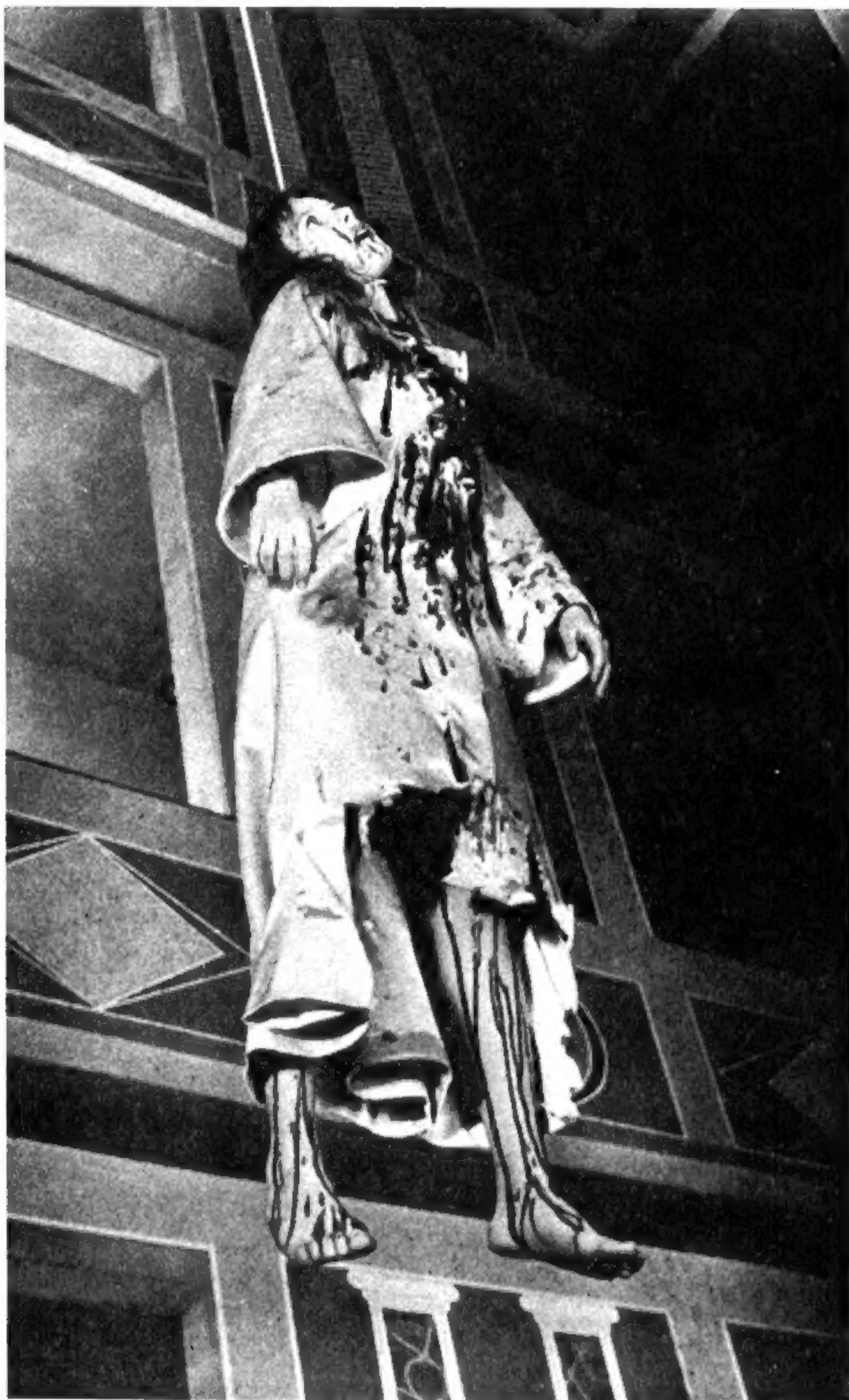
Dario Argento is currently the king of the Italian thriller. His latest movie *Suspiria* (reviewed in HoH 14) was met with mixed feelings by the critics, as his films combine uneasy suspense with shock tactics and a liberal sprinkling of gore.

Argento's career began when he landed a job with the Rome newspaper *Pesa Sera* as their film critic. Shortly after, he began writing scripts for movies including Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, for which film—along with Bertolucci—he also prepared the total storyboards.



Scorning formal filmschool training, Argento followed in the footsteps of such other luminaries of the movie world as Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola and moved from criticism straight into making his own films. He made his debut with a full-length feature film called *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1969). Interesting to note that the "Bird with the Crystal Plumage" motif turned up in the later film *Suspiria* when, in the gripping climax, Jessica Harper knocked an ornamental bird from a table then used one of its crystal feathers to put an end to the Black Queen of Witches, Elena Markof.

The following interview by our Belgian correspondent Gilbert Verschooten (editor of the fine Belgian horror magazine *Fantoom*) took place at the Sitges festival in which Dario Argento talked about his influences and their effect on his approach to movie-making.



HoH: You were quoted in *House of Hammer 14* as saying that your main influences have been the German expressionist cinema in general and Fritz Lang in particular. . . .

Argento: Yes. I studied the expressionist school thoroughly, although I don't know to what extent I was influenced by it. But I liked what Fritz Lang did—not only Lang, who was undoubtedly the greatest, but other German directors as well. In my latest film *Suspiria*, I used expressionistic architecture, strange camera-angles and things like that. It was my way of paying a personal tribute.

HoH: Another influence seems to be Mario Bava, especially his *Blood and Black Lace* (*Sei Donne per l'Assassino*, 1964).

Argento: I was writing reviews at that time, between 1964 and 1968 and I remember very well that I wrote one about that film. I had seen and analysed all of these movies when they came out, but it should be remembered that this horror film movement was rather short: it only lasted for five or six years and there were not that many films either. Nobody talked much about these works then, they were considered to be purely commercial and even a bit vulgar. Nobody seemed to notice that a kind of revolution was going on: for the first time in Italy some non-realistic films were being made. That was very important. Only the younger critics fully understood this, but as we wrote very ruthless and rather complicated criticisms, we were not much appreciated in our country. We took into consideration the different aspects of a film and tried to pursue a political, technical and personal approach, not just limiting ourselves to storytelling or saying something about the actors.

HoH: Can we speak of a direct influence, then?

Argento: I think my films are personal to me. I produce them, write the script and the music, design the sets and the costumes, etc. I want them to reflect *my* personality and *my* ideas. This is quite essential to me.

HoH: Why are your movies so gorey?

Argento: Because I make violent movies, and because the blood is an inseparable part of them. It is a means of expressing yourself, while you can obtain some very expressive and even aesthetic effects with it. . . . I am attracted to violence as it is a typical phenomenon of our time. Violence is a new form of protest, a refusal of all the established values. The time for gentle protest is past and hard action takes over now. Violence is also, to a large extent, a way of communication.

HoH: In several of your films the murderer is a woman: Eva Renzi in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (*L'Uccello dalle Piume di Cristallo*, 1969), Mimsy Farmer in *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (*Quattro Mosche di Velluto Grigio*, 1971), and in both *Deep Red* (*Profondo Rosso*, 1975) and *Suspiria* (1976).

Argento: Maybe there is a very simple explanation: I work much better with female than with male players: they are the

better actors, they react in a more emotional way and let themselves go. And they are more obedient, too. . . . Men do not respond in the same fashion. And as the assassins are very important characters in my films, you can understand why I turn them into women. At least I think that is the reason. . . . You know, it's difficult to analyse all these aspects very rationally: I make my films in a kind of hypnotic state and afterwards it's not always easy to explain why you did certain things.

HoH: How are your films received in Italy?



Facing page: Dario Argento himself, deeply engrossed in reading HoH14. Plus a scene from Argento's latest shocker, Suspiria. Above: A terrified and rain-soaked Jessica Harper about to face the nightmare events of Suspiria.

Argento: I can't complain. People write a lot of things about me these days. My first movies were very unusual for Italian audiences, since they were in fact experimental ones and there had not been many attempts within that genre in Italy. I like to apply new things in the field of technology, music, mixing and that kind of stuff. For example, I often use strange cameras. In *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* I used a certain camera manufactured in Eastern Germany, that had been sent directly from Berlin allowing a speed of 30,000 images per second! In merely two seconds, it consumed an entire reel. That was incredible, it is really the camera of the future! In *Deep Red* I employed a teleguided micro-camera initially used for purely medical purposes, existing only in Hollywood. It permitted the camera to enter an actor's mouth which could be followed on a television screen. You could accomplish breath-taking camera-movements of one centimetre that created unbelievable effects. . . . In *Suspiria*

I installed mirrors to get an indirect light which is much softer than the natural exposure, as they absorb some of the glare. This allowed me to change the complexions of the actors. I also used an old Technicolour 40 ASA film, rather than the current 500 ASA one.

HoH: *Suspiria* is in fact your first fantasy film up to now, your other achievements being merely thrillers. Will you continue in this direction?

Argento: I think so, yes. *Suspiria* represented a kind of challenge to me as it is impossible

to employ realistic methods for a film that is not realistic by definition. So I invented very unreal colours and had sets built like the ancient gothic cathedrals in Germany. . . . I got the permission to shoot in Erasmus's house in Freiburg, where he wrote his *Elegy of Madness*, as well as in the Munich Bierhaus where Hitler gave some of his addresses. . . . The large square where the blind man is killed by his dog is the famous Königplatz in Munich, another memorable place of pilgrimage for the Nazis where the hidden monsters and ghosts are still present. It is the curse of the environment which made the dog kill its master.

HoH: Can political opinions also be read into your other films?

Argento: It is quite inevitable that political ideas pop up in my movies as politics are a reality of everyday life. But this happens in a very spontaneous way. . . . It is only natural, as I said before that a film will reflect the personality of its maker.

HoH: Do you improvise on the set?



Argento: I do in the sense that the actors know when it will be their turn and what specific scene they will do. I arrive on the set, have the lighting settled in the necessary way and then I say, for example: 'We shoot scene 32'. I like the spontaneity that can be obtained that way. Of course the players have to know their lines, but that is all. I always do my films that way. When an actor knows exactly when he will be on it becomes mechanical and all the emotion is lost.

HoH: Did the famous actors with whom you have worked accept this treatment?

Argento: Better than that. They reacted superbly, because they like new things and have never worked like that before. It was the younger actors who objected: they have only one certain method of acting, and when you take away that method nothing is left. They don't have the experience to do other things. Take Tony Musante in *Bird with the Crystal Plumage*. The first day he was completely lost, but after a short period of adaptation everything went very smoothly. And I think he gave one of his best performances in that film.

HoH: Is that the reason why you cast older stars?

Argento: I always do the casting with the special requirements of a certain part in mind and as far as the casting is concerned, I am not limiting myself to what is happening in Rome, but also in Paris, London, Berlin, Hollywood and so on. This evidently results into a more international cast.

HoH: Did you cast Joan Bennett for *Suspiria*?

Argento: Yes. I know her very well, since she appeared in several of Fritz Lang's films. She was also his wife, as you know, and a great actress. I went to New York to

see her . . . She had grown older, but I tried to make her appear as she did in *Scarlet Street*, *Beyond the Door* (GB title: *The Devil Within Her*) etc. I put a patch on her, made her use the same lipstick, the same black eye lashes, I tried to achieve the same colour of her hair, to make her look like she did for Lang, thirty years later. As a very distinguished woman of the world.

Above: Jessica Harper in a deathly struggle with the incarnation of evil, following (above, facing page) the death of her friend (Stefania Casini) in a room of razor-sharp coiled wire. Below: David Hemmings narrowly escapes death at the hands of the mass murderer in Deep Red.

HoH: How was the make-up of the *Suspiria* witch done?

Argento: That was no make-up at all! For three months I looked for the oldest woman I could possibly find in Rome for the part and tested several dozen of women over 100. Eventually I found what I wanted, an incredibly old creature, the oldest person I ever saw in my life. It was terrible, I really sensed an impression of



physical horror. She was very good in the film, although she was of course not playing a part in the usual sense of the word. And for the part of the man-servant I wanted a madman, a real fool from an asylum. I started searching for one, but the Italian law prohibits the use of them. So I looked for a man who was mad, without being locked up. I discovered one in a post-office, when I was mailing a postcard. He had a terrible look and awful teeth. And during the shooting he even made propositions to the actresses!

HoH: What was the budget of *Suspiria*?

Argento: *Suspiria* cost one billion Italian Lira, almost two million dollars: a lot of money, for sure! But it was not a film that was shot in four weeks, and I think everybody will see that. The shooting in Germany and Italy lasted 15 weeks.

HoH: And your other films?

Argento: *Deep Red* took 12 weeks, the others between 10 and 12. Time is a very important aspect in my films. I always have a chronometer at hand and an assistant always gives me the exact time of each of the actors' movements. I want my films to be rhythmic and as I already have an idea of the music that will be used in the movie, everything has to be carefully timed. I already did this in the very first film I directed. For *Suspiria*, I wrote the music beforehand, and had it played on the set to inspire the players' gestures. It was as if the film existed already.

HoH: You have a project under way with George Romero. How is the cooperation going on?

Argento: We wrote the script of *Dawn of the Dead*, as the film will be called, together, it is now being shot in Pittsburgh. He is directing it and I write the music and act as the producer.

HoH: His approach is entirely different from yours . . .

Argento: We are old friends and know each other's work very well. I think the result will be very interesting. It is really *Night of the Living Dead* revisited in 1977, with all the technical knowledge that became available in the meantime, only much colder and much harder. It is as if ten years later he is remaking his own film. But the finished product will be very different, as his ideas have changed very much during this time.

HoH: Isn't it unfortunate that Romero never succeeded in detaching himself from *Night of the Living Dead*?

Argento: With that film he made his masterpiece. So why should he do other things? It was a small production, made with little money, but with plenty of ideas in it. Romero is a Cuban, and he knows the Caribbean zombie theme very well: it's part of his culture. This explains the exceptional strength of the film. Maybe it is not a masterpiece, like my own films are maybe not masterpieces, but they are interesting and have something to say. I think that's essential.



The Films of Dario Argento

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage (1969)
(Italy: *L'Uccello Dalle Plume di Cristallo*)
With: Tony Musante, Suzy Kendall, Eva Renzi, Umberto Raho, Enrico Maria Salerno, Mario Adorf and Renato Romano.

Written and Directed by Dario Argento, Director of Photography Vittorio Storaro, Art Direction by Dario Micheli, Edited by Franco Fraticelli, Music by Ennio Morricone, Sound by Carlo Diotallevi, Produced by Salvatore Argento. A Seda Spettacoli/CCC Production.

The Cat O'Nine Tails (1971)
(Italy: *Il Gatto a Nove Code*)

With: Karl Malden, James Franciscus, Catherine Spaak, Cinzia de Carolis, Carlo Alighiero, Vittoria Cingia, Pier Paolo Capponi, Corrado Olmi, Tino Carraro.

Written and Directed by Dario Argento from a story by Dario Argento, Luigi Collo and Dardano Sacchetti, Director of Photography Enrico Menzzer, Art Direction by Carl Leva, Edited by Franco Fraticelli, Music by Ennio Morricone, Sound by Luciano Anzellotti, Production Manager Angelo Iacono, Produced by Salvatore Argento. A Seda Spettacoli/Mondial Films/Terra Filmkunst/Labrador Films Production.

Four Flies on Grey Velvet (1971)

(Italy: *Quattro Mosche di Velluto Grigio*)
With: Michael Brandon, Mimsy Farmer, Jean-Pierre Marielle, Francine Racette, Bud Spencer, Calisto Tanzi, Marisa Fabbri, Oreste Lionello.

Written and Directed by Dario Argento from a story by Dario Argento, Luigi Cozzi and Mario Foglietti, Director of Photography Franco Di Giacomo, Art Direction by Enrico Sabbatini, Edited by Franco Fraticelli, Music by Ennio Morricone, Produced by Salvatore Argento. A Seda Spettacoli/Universal Film Production.

The 5 Days of Milan (1973)

(Italy: *Les Cinque Giornate*)

With: Adriano Celentano, Enzo Cerusico, Marilu Tolo, Sergio Graziani, Luisa de Santis, Carla Tota, Glauco Onorato.

Written and Directed by Dario Argento, Director of Photography Luigi Kuweller, Edited by Franco Fraticelli, Produced by Salvatore Argento.

Deep Red (1975)

(Italy: *Profondo Rosso*)

David Hemmings (*as Marc Daly*), Daria Nicolodi (*Gianna Brezzi*) with Gabriele Lavia, Macha Meril, Eros Pagni, Giuliana Calandra and Nicoletta Elmi.

Directed by Dario Argento, Screenplay by Dario Argento and Bernardino Zapponi, Director of Photography Luigi Kuweller, Edited by Franco Fraticelli, Music by Giorgio Gaslini and The Goblins, Makeup by Giuliano Laurenti, Produced by Claudio Argento, Executive Producer Salvatore Argento. A Seda Spettacoli Production.

Suspiria (1976)

Jessica Harper (*as Susy*), Stefania Cassini (*Sara*), Flavio Bucci (*Daniel*), Miguel Bose (*Mark*), Udo Kier (*Frank*), Rudolph Schundler (*Prof Milius*), Alida Valli (*Miss Tanner*), Joan Bennet (*Miss Blank*).

Directed by Dario Argento, Screenplay by Dario Argento and Daria Nicolodi, Director of Photography Luciano Tovoli, Production Design by Giuseppe Natali, Art Direction by Maurizio Garrone, David Bassan and Enrico Fiorentini, Special Effects by Germano Natali, Makeup by Pierantonio Mecaceci, Edited by Franco Fraticelli, Music by Dario Argento and The Goblins, Sound by Mario Dallimonti, Sound Effects by Luciano Anzellotti, Produced by Claudio Argento, Executive Producer Salvatore Argento. A Seda Spettacoli Production.